

# The Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities

## *Breaking Ground*

Review by Frank Meeuwis

*Gray Matters* is a book of poetry, first published in 2006, with personal insights into the life of Heidi Lerner, a traumatic brain injury survivor. I also sustained a traumatic brain injury and can directly relate to Ms. Lerner's expressions and experiences.

The purpose of the book is to educate about brain injury and its complications—or sequelae. Reading this book gives support to people who have had brain injuries and helps readers know more about brain injury itself from an insider's perspective. Ms. Lerner explains that the brain conducts who we are and she wants the reader to know "what it's like to walk in [her] shoes!"

The book is arranged by the typical stages that a brain injury survivor may move through. Ms. Lerner begins with poems that describe brain injury and sometimes uses technical brain injury terminology, which commonly is learned as you go through recovery. *Gray Matters* also defines each unfamiliar term in a glossary in the back of the book—helpful to me for a term or two that I thought I had forgotten after my own rehabilitation experience! Through her emotional and inspiring poetry, Ms. Lerner also describes her experience of rehabilitation and the following positive psychological developments that may result from (and I agree resulted from mine) rehabilitation.

- Survivors become more in touch with themselves and others; more 'in-the-moment' living.
- After accepting personal limitations, a person tends to develop a more accepting attitude.
- Due to the loss of previous functions and skills, it is common for survivors to find new, previously unrecognized strengths.

Ms. Lerner then explores and describes many of the possible symptoms or complications that result from a traumatic injury to the brain. Her poetry recounts different aspects of rehabilitation and how they each fit together to build a new life for the survivor.

Ms. Lerner describes her experience of returning to academia—a journey that I too completed and found much in common in terms of our perceptions of the experience. *Gray Matters* also covers the specific structure of the brain, what the different areas are responsible for and some of the deficits that may come from an injury to a specific area of the brain.

[Ms. Lerner shares a very unique experience that she had with a sea otter off the coast of California in her kayak.](#) Here she tackles an issue of personal concern: that every day high intensity sonar and ocean noise pollution cause brain injuries in thousands of mammals and other ocean life. She tells the reader what Web sites to visit and what they can write to their elected officials to raise awareness of the devastating effects of high intensity sonar used, for example, by the U.S. Navy.

I found, after reading *Gray Matters*, that I remember feeling much the same as Ms. Lerner describes in her poems. Reading her experience did not open sore wounds for me, but allowed me to more vividly recall and move through my memory of the stages following my brain injury. Most important, I think, is Ms. Lerner's hope that we need to better understand that brain injury can happen to anyone we know at any time, and that life is forever changed for the survivor and the people to whom they are connected.

*Frank Meeuwis is a member of the Tennessee Traumatic Brain Injury Advisory Council and project director of People Talking to People at The Arc Tennessee. Mr. Meeuwis sustained his brain injury on March 15, 1997.*